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ABSTRACT

Despite all its flaws, the American experiment in pluralism has in many ways been an incredible success. We have been so busy criticizing our failures, so busy comparing ourselves negatively with Sweden and Great Britain that we have not bothered to ask how the United States of America has been able to absorb so much diversity without tearing itself apart. Neither the melting pot nor the cultural pluralism model is a particularly useful way of looking at American society: we have a society of ethnic groups. An ethnic group is defined as "a collectivity based on presumed origin, which shapes to some extent the attitudes and behaviors of those who share that origin, and with which certain people may freely choose to identify at certain times of their lives." What then is to be said about the current emphasis on "militant ethnicity?" First, the data we have collected at the National Opinion Research Center make it clear that the "militant ethnic" approach will only appeal to some people. Second, to the extent that the strategy of militant ethnicity presumes a "pillarized" society, it simply is inaccurate in its reading of the social structure of the U. S. The society would be pillarized only by such circumstances that the overwhelming majority of Italians, for example, thought of themselves as Italians most of the time and if being Italian became the almost exclusive identity which they chose to predicate of themselves. (Author/JM)

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THE FUTURE OF THE ETHNIC "REVIVAL"

by

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THE FUTURE OF THE ETHNIC "REVIVAL"

Andrew M. Greeley

I begin with two stories told me recently by professional colleagues. In one instance a friend of a colleague was born in Hungary but had lived in a Western European country for twenty years. Finally he saved enough money to purchase for himself a "second class" citizenship. He summoned all his friends together for a massive celebration of the fact that he was now at last permitted to devote his life's savings toward purchasing his citizenship.

The other story concerned a man born in Czechoslovakia of German and Czech parents. He married a German from the Sudetenland, applied for citizenship in West Germany, and was turned down because he and his wife spoke to one another frequently in Czech.

Most Americans are shocked to the point of disbelief when they hear such stories. We take it for granted that access to citizenship for immigrants is a matter of course in other societies just as it is in our own. In fact, we are reluctant to have people within our borders who do not apply for citizenship while other countries are reluctant to grant it. Other nations jealously guard citizenship; we vigorously insist that everyone becomes a citizen.

Thus little attention is paid in the United States to the plight of the "guest workers" in the Western Euoropean social democracies. Whether they be from Africa, Yugoslavia, or Italy, the "guest workers" are permitted to stay for only a brief period of time, are generally not allowed to bring their families, and are vigorously excluded from citizenship. Such practices seem so incredible to Americans that we simply ignore them as if they didn't exist. We are told repeatedly, for example, how "progressive" and "enlightened" the Swedes are, how much we have to learn from them. Yet for all their progress and enlightenment, the Swedes are not about to treat Italian guest workers like anything more than outcasts, who are not especially welcome and surely never permitted to become Swedes.

Like so many other things in American society that are taken for granted, no one has thought it particularly worth while to try to understand why citizenship is so readily accessible in the United States to immigrants when in most other North Atlantic countries citizenship is but rarely conceded to foreigners and then only under the most rigorous circumstances.

As Professor Arthur Mann has suggested to me, the founding fathers of the United States, political philosophers that they were, were very conscious of the need for an intellectual and cultural base for their new nation. Such a base could not be religious because the society was already denominationally pluralistic: Congregationalist in New England, Quaker in Pennsylvania, Anglican in New York and Virginia, Methodist and Baptist in the South. Nor could the cultural basis for the society be

ethnic; even at the time of the Revolutionary War at least half of the population was not Anglo-Saxon. (Most of the non Anglo-Saxon half were Scotch-Irish, German, and black.) Nor could the common basis be an unique cultural heritage, for while Hastings, the Magna Carta, the War of the Roses, and the Glorious Revolution meant something to the Anglo-Saxons, it meant much less, if anything at all, to the non Anglo-Saxon half.

Therefore the founding fathers decided--as the early naturalization laws make clear--that the central core of beliefs that was to create the American nation would consist of certain political principles as contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Citizenship would be granted to the man who was willing to be a "citizen" in the Enlightenment sense of the word, that is to say, a man who committed himself to the political principles of the eighteenth century which were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. No one could be excluded from citizenship whatever his religion, his ethnicity, or his heritage so long as he was willing to pledge allegiance to these political principles.

One supposes that Jefferson and Madison would have been horrified at the thought that within something less than a century forty-five new immigrants would come to the shores of the United States from all over the world while at the same time the population expanded across the continent. Yet, however grudgingly, the native Americans did indeed admit the immigrants, requiring of them (in theory at least) only that they pledge allegiance to the political system in order to achieve equal rights

as citizens. The theory may have been flawed, but it was flawed in practice, not in theoretical statement. The gathering in of the nations to construct the American republic in approximately one century is one of the most extraordinary phenomena of modern history. The incredible thing is not that there has been injustice and violence in the history of the country; it is that the country held together at all.

But let us be clear about the flaws. Neither the blacks nor the American Indians were given an opportunity to become citizens. Orientals were admitted for a time but then excluded. Eastern and southern Europeans were admitted by the millions, but then the American republic lost its nerve and departed from its principles of equal access to citizenship to establish discriminatory quota systems to keep the "inferior" peoples of eastern and southern Europe from contaminating the native American stock. German-Americans, whose loyalty to the country ought never to have been questioned in either 1916 or in 1941, were forced to pay a heavy cultural price for being German. Japanese-Americans were herded together in concentration camps during the Second World War. Finally, while in theory it was not required of immigrants that they give up either their own language or their own culture, in practice the social pressures were so strong that languages were lost and cultures were repressed. One had to do other things besides commit oneself to political democracy in order to be fully accepted as American. No matter what the theory said, the facts of the matter were that names had to be changed, accents hidden, and cultural pasts forgotten. Sometimes even religion had to be denied before American elites were willing to acknowledge that

the children and the grandchildren of immigrants were really as American as anyone else.

But the American creed kept us uneasy about these transgressions. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated quotas against Orientals and eastern and southern Europeans. While injustice against blacks and American Indians remains, practically no one in the society defends such injustice any longer, and major efforts are being made to eliminate it. More recently, in great part as the result of black emphasis on cultural diversity, the country has at last begun to come to terms with the religious, racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity that exists within its boundaries.

The Spanish-speaking may be successful where the Germans and the Poles failed. They may be able to remain bilingual, and in the best expression of the American creed they have every right to. The theory is that one need only subscribe to American political democracy; it does not say that one should speak only English--though it does say, at least implicitly, that one should be able to speak English in addition to whatever other language one chooses. It is problematic that bilingualism can survive in the United States; but at the present point in time, considerable numbers of Americans are willing to admit that there is nothing "unAmerican" about bilingualism and that if some groups want it, they have every right to it.

Despite all its flaws, then, the American experiment in pluralism has in many ways been an incredible success. When one looks at the ethnic,

religious, and racial conflicts in Indonesia, Ceylon, India, Bengladesh, Iraq, Burma, Cypress, Palestine, Yugoslavia, and Ulster, one is astonished that there has been so little conflict and violence in American society. Despite its large population, its immense geography, and the variegated origins of its citizenry, the United States has had only one civil war, and that was a conflict basically between two Anglo-Saxon groups. Scotch-Irish and Celtic-Irish in the United States get along reasonably well, while in Ulster they still shoot at one another. The United Kingdom may be a far more civilized place than the United States, as many of our self-critics are only too happy to remind us, but that Celt and Saxon are at peace with each other here surely must be considered some sort of progress over the situation in Ulster.

But why, despite its flaws and failures, its mistakes, hesitations, compromises, and imperfections, in the face of all the centrifugal forces that could have torn it apart so easily has the American republic held together at all? I submit that no one knows. We have been so busy criticizing our failures, so busy comparing ourselves negatively with Sweden and Great Britain that we have not bothered to ask how the United States of America has been able to absorb so much diversity without tearing itself apart.

For we do not have a "melting pot" in Israel Zangwill's sense of the term. Some of the ethnics may have "melted," despite Michael Novak, but large numbers of them have not, and the "melting" does not seem to have noticeably decreased the diversity in the society. On the other hand, neither do we have Horace Kallen's "cultural pluralism," because there is

intermarriage and there is one common language. We do not have a "pillarized" society like Ireland or Holland or Belgium or French Canada. There is no such thing as a Polish community or a black community or an Italian community in this country the way there is a Catholic community in the north of Ireland, a Flemish community in Belgium, or a French community in Canada. Geography, social class, religion, politics, profession are not coterminous with nationality. There are Jews who are not particularly rich, Irishmen who are not particularly active politically, Polish Republicans, Italian Protestants, black conservatives--and all in reasonably substantial numbers. If one knows the ethnic background of a person, one can predict with greater or lesser degree of confidence a number of other things about him, but one can be wrong frequently enough to make it obvious that we do not have a mosaic society, or even one remotely approaching a society with impermeable boundaries separating its various ethnic groups.

Save for a minority of people, religion, race, and ethnicity are only a component of identity and do not exhaust it. The pertinent question is not whether we have cultural pluralism in Horace Kallen's sense; the question is, rather, under what sets of circumstance do what kinds of people fall back on their ethnic consciousness and under what sets of circumstance does an ethnic heritage affect attitudes, values, and behavior? Is ethnicity important when one chooses a wife, a poker partner, a psychiatrist, undertaker, insurance man, construction contractor, priest, political candidate? Are there times when ethnicity influences our behavior when we are not conscious of such influence? Why are the Irish the most

politicized of American ethnic groups? Why are the Poles the most likely to vote? Why do the Jews overchoose medicine as a career? Why do Germans overchoose science and engineering? Why do the Irish drink so much? Why do the Jews and Italians drink so little? Why do the Irish have high morale and the Italians low morale? Why do the Irish have a high feeling of political efficacy and the Jews a low feeling on the same scale? The questions are endless and they leave no doubt that ethnicity is still an important factor in American society. Yet correlations between ethnicity on the one hand and attitudes and behavior on the other are all relatively modest, of about the same order of magnitude as social class (although independent of social class). Ethnicity, in other words, is important, but it is not all important.

If neither the melting pot nor the cultural pluralism model is a particularly useful way of looking at American society, then what models do we have available? I would submit that what we have is a society of ethnic groups, and since that is merely another way of stating the problem, I would define an ethnic group as "a collectivity based on presumed common origin, which shapes to some extent the attitudes and behaviors of those who share that origin, and with which certain people may freely choose to identify at certain times of their lives."

The words are all carefully chosen. First, ethnicity is a way of being American. Immigrants did not come as ethnics; they became ethnics on the shores of this country. It scarcely made sense to have "Irish" or "Italian" be an important component of your identity when everyone else in the vicinity

was Irish or Italian. One defined oneself in terms of region, province, the town from which one came. Only in this country were there those who were not Irish or not Italian or not Polish or not Norwegian, and here such a form of self-definition distinguished one over against the others in the society. It also provided one with a modality by which one could become part of the society. Only to a minor extent did the ethnic group represent a way of looking back at a previous heritage. It was,more importantly, a way of looking forward to finding one's place in the American heritage. Even concern about national freedom in one's country of origin was justified in terms of its impact on American society. The American Irish, for example, supported the Irish nationalist movements because, it was argued, they would only fully be accepted in the United States when Ireland could be numbered among the rank of free nations. Irish nationalism was a way of being American because if was felt that full Americanism would be denied until Ireland was free.

Similarly, the high level of patriotism among the American ethnic groups--so quickly ridiculed by the young and the radical--can only be understood when it is realized that for most immigrants the right to own property and the right to vote were experienced for the first time in this country. One might be legitimately proud of one's own heritage, but one was under no illusion that the ancestral lands provided more freedom or more opportunity than was to be found in the United States. Quite the contrary. Gratitude to the United States was a direct result of the assumption that the United States had made it possible for the immigrants to be

both free and prosperous. The eastern and southern European Catholics are the most likely to vote of any American ethnic group. In all liklihood it is because they were the ones who were the least likely to have the franchise in the old country. Voting becomes an important way of symbolizing their Americanness; and their ethnicity, from their point of view, is as American as anything else--and frequently more so.

Secondly, our definition insists on the presence of cultural heritage which influences attitudes, values, personality, and behavior even if the people being influenced are unconscious of the impact of the past on the present. The Irish have been in the United States longer than most ethnic groups and are probably least concerned of all the immigrant groups about their ancestral past; they have become in most visible ways quite indistinguishable from middle-class Anglo-Saxons, yet on a wide variety of measures of activity, behavior, attitudes, values, personality, the Irish are profoundly and radically different from other groups in American society. If an uniquely Irish heritage can survive three and sometimes four generations in the United States, there is no reason to think that the other heritages will melt away quickly.

Thirdly, as far as conscious self-definition goes, ethnicity is an option. It is a form of self-definition available for those who choose it, but in the United States, both in theoretical principle and in practical life, no one is compelled to be an ethnic either by members of his own group or by members of any other group. Of course, the principal is frequently violated. Blacks are judged to be black whether they

want to or not; to some extent, it is still impossible to stop being a Jew if one chooses. But clearly the ideal toward which the American creed strains is that every man ought to be free to identify as much as he wants with his past heritage (so long as he is committed to American political democracy) or as free as he wants to reject all conscious ethnic identification. The racial problem will be solved in the United States when "being black"-as a form of self-definition--is an option that a black person is free to exercise or not as he chooses.

Finally, it must be observed that our definition admits of the possibility of considerable pluralism within an ethnic group. Eastern Europeans in the United States, for example, are usually split into two groups, the ones who came before World War II and the ones who came after. The Czech split into three groups, pre-World War II, 1948 refugees, and the 1968 refugees. When one studies diversities within groups, one is tempted to comment that in some cases there is as much pluralism within the groups as there is between them and the rest of society. The ethnic collectivity, then, is constituted by the simple fact that because of the diverse origins of our people, national religious or racial background is a predicate variable, which we may on occasion choose to make an explicit part of our self-defintion. How this has come to be and how it all works in practice are research questions to which American social science could well devote considerable time, resources, and energy in the decades ahead.

Within such a context, what is to be said about the current emphasis on "militant ethnicity?"

First of all, the data we have collected at the National Opinion Research Center make it clear that the"militant ethnic" approach will only appeal to some people. With the exception of the nonwhite groups, none of the other religious or nationality groups in American society experience the degree of oppression that would make substantial numbers of them willing to sympathetically cooperate with those whose political and social style is militant. This does not mean that the militant leaders do not have an important role to play; it merely meas that they do not speak and in the nature of things cannot and will not speak, for substantial segments (indeed, overwhelming majorities) of the constituencies they may claim.

Second, to the extent that the strategy of militant ethnicity presumes a "pillarized" society, it simply is innacurate in its reading of the social structure of the United States. The society would be pillarized only by such circumstances that the overwhelming majority of Italians, for example, thought of themselves as Italian most of the time and if being Italian became the almost exclusive identity which they chose to predicate of themselves. It may be questioned whether such an extreme form of self-definition would be a good thing, but such a question is purely theoretical, because no serious ecrutiny of American society as it exists presently could possibly give any indication that this kind of exclusivist self-definition is very likely. Militant leaders

may raise somewhat the level of ethnic consciousness, and this may be all to the good; they may promote greater pride in the heritage, and this is certainly good; they may occasionally mobilize political pressure, and whether that is good or bad depends upon which direction the pressure is applied; they may be able to put together coalitions that have some impact on improving the quality of life in the city, and no one would deny the importance of that goal. But militant ethnic leaders will not turn the United States into a mosaic society, and to the extent that they think they can, they merely deceive themselves.

Finally, if militant ethnicity means that Anglo-Saxon Protestants are scapegoated as the new inkblot of American societal ills, then militant ethnicity is unAmerican. Wasps (a term I no longer use because of the pejorative connotations that have recently been attached to it) are no more appropriate an inkblot than is blacks or Jews or Slavs or Italians or anyone else. Furthermore, to lump all Anglo-Saxon Protestants, whether they be from Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas, or California, under one category is to engage in intolerable oversimplification.

Then what is one to think of the ethnic revival?

Perhaps the first thing that ought to be observed is that there is no such thing as an ethnic revival. The ethnic groups are out there where they always have been--in the northwest side of Chicago, in Hamtramck, in South Boston, in Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island. There is no particular research evidence that they are any more militant or outraged, or that they feel any more oppressed than they did in the past. What we have instead of an ethnic revival is an arrival of consciousness of ethnicity.

We have become conscious not of the ethnics themselves but of their more outspoken leaders and of the journalists and scholars whose business it is to monitor American culture. If there is an ethnic revival at all, it is among us: we have once again discovered that there is diversity in American society. While it is admirable that we have rediscovered this diversity, one might pause to wonder why it took us so long.

And which way will the ethnic revival go? I would suggest that there are two things that will happen. We must first understand both the various ethnic traditions that make up American society and also the processes, the protocols, the rituals, the implicit modus vivendi by which these groups have managed to coexist without major violence and conflict for a sustained period of time. That only one major sociological study has been done on the American Poles--W. I.Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's Polish Peasant in Europe and America--is astonishing. That that book was written more than fifty years ago is even more astonishing. Ignorance of the various ethnic traditions in the United States is an incredible piece of social scientific irresponsibility.

But in addition to understanding ourselves and each other, we must, I think, also enjoy the diversity of cultural heritages. Enjoyment should include more than just periodic visits to ethnic restaurants, as admirable and enjoyable as such gustatory tourist trips may be. We are all richer because the Jewish literary,cultural, and comic tradition has been shared with the rest of the country, but there are other riches of cultural heritage locked up in the eastern and southern European ghettos

that still exist in American cities.* These ethnic heritages are priceless resources for our country. That the rest of us have been uninterested in them and that we have, perhaps without realizing it, put pressure on those who possess such heritages to forget them is an unconscionable waste. Such waste must come to an end.

The day may come when those who are most affluent and hence have the most freedom of choice about where to live will deliberately and consciously choose to live in communities where there is a maximum of racial, religious, nationality, and cultural diversity. They will argue, it is to be hoped, that by providing an opportunity for their children to grow up amidst such diversity they are providing an educational experience more important than college. It will mean that Americans will have to acknowledge not merely that they have something to learn from the Jews and the blacks (and many elite Americans are ready to admit that now) but that they also have something to learn from the Poles, the Italians, the Slovaks, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Armenians, Crimean Tartars, Russian Germans, and even (heaven save us all) from the Irish.

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*And a ghetto is a ghetto even if it is only fifty or sixty per cent of one ethnic group.